

CHAPTER NINE

A DAILY MINIMUM OF MENTAL PRAYER?

One of the common effects of a retreat experience is a desire for a more intimate relationship with the Lord. The retreatant looks around for things to do that will preserve this new-found joy, and even deepen it. And one of the most common decisions is to get really serious about the prayer life. Very often there is in the rules of one's congregation an obligation to a specific quantity of daily mental prayer. Commonly this is not a firm part of the retreatant's past year, and he feels that he must make sure it becomes a part of his life this coming year.

Recently, in a workshop on the spiritual life, I began by setting up a case of such a retreatant. I imagined the retreatant coming to get advice on how much time to put aside each day for mental prayer, and when to make it. Six of the fourteen people present suggested a minimum of forty-five minutes. Four others suggested a thirty-minute minimum. One suggested twenty minutes as a minimum. The most common suggestion on when to make it was the early morning. The late evening was suggested by a few. I think that these suggestions would be rather common today.

Let us look briefly at a suggestion made by St. John Chrysostom:

He who prays should not try after long prayer, but should

pray often, for both Christ and St. Paul teach us to make use very frequently of short prayers, repeated frequently at intervals.

Now Chrysostom was a desert monk for a time. These monks got into the whole question of prayer, so his suggestion is not just a surface impulse, nor is it meant for beginners only.

What harm does Chrysostom see in long prayer?

Should you pray at great length, it will often happen that you open yourself to attacks of the devil, giving him ready access to your mind to distract and upset you, leading you away from what you are saying.

I can just imagine telling my dear novice master that I stopped praying after three minutes for fear the devil would get in, as blessed Chrysostom warns.

But if you give yourself up to short, frequent prayer, dividing up the time of prayer discreetly, you will easily retain control of your mind, while making such prayer with greater recollection.¹¹

Notice the values he sets forth: attention is critical. Length may harm that critical value, so it is not advisable. Brief prayer can be attentive.

Is Chrysostom a single voice speaking in a way that is far from the actual tradition in the early centuries? Let us hear St. Augustine. He is writing to a woman who is starting a "house of prayer," the lady Proba. Augustine tells her that attention should never be forced.

The brethren in Egypt are reported to have very frequent and very brief prayers; the prayers are, as it were, quick and ejaculatory, for fear the wide-awake conscious attention so indispensable in prayer should vanish or lose its keenness by prolonged exercises. And in this they show plainly enough that, just as this attention should not be allowed to exhaust itself if it cannot continue for long, so neither should it be suddenly suspended if it be sustained.

This is rather strange, and so different from our practice today. Augustine maintains that prayer should be shortened to

suit the capacity of the soul, rather than that the soul be forced to do something it cannot continue over a long period. Here is that same set of values that we saw in Chrysostom: attention is the key to effective prayer, and the length of prayer should be determined by its effect upon attention.

"The brethren in Egypt are reported to have very frequent and very brief prayers." Not just "frequent and brief" as in Chrysostom, but "very frequent and very brief." Now how brief is brief? These are desert monks and contemplatives. Perhaps they mean: don't go over four hours; keep it short—an hour or two. In his next sentence Augustine spells it out. "Their prayers are, as it were, quick and ejaculatory." Now that is rather brief. Ejaculatory! And then Augustine gives the reason why mental prayer should be brief:

... for fear the wide-awake conscious attention so indispensable in prayer should vanish or lose its keenness by prolonged exercises.¹²

There it is again: attention as an absolute in effective prayer, the determinant of how long prayer should be.

What a different world this is from the spirituality that is common today where a minimum daily input of mental prayer is considered by many—if not most—to be an essential for spiritual growth. On most lists for things to be done to bring about renewal, the daily mental prayer input ranks at the top. We do not consider it likely that intimacy with God will come into a person's life without such a practice. There are articles in spiritual magazines on how this person and that experienced great growth when they began giving their prayer more time. Yet this minimum daily input of mental prayer was not always considered all that vital.

St. Thomas Aquinas specifically raised the question: how long should prayer be. His response:

It is becoming that prayer should last only so long as is useful for arousing the fervor of interior desire; but when it goes beyond this measure, so that it cannot last without tedium, prayer is not to be stretched out.¹³

If only I had had that text when I was a novice!

Notice that St. Thomas has a norm. If a person comes to the fervor of interior desire quickly—is, in other words, in consolation—his prayer will be short. This is similar to the suggestion of St. Ignatius Loyola: to pray longer in desolation. It also spells out that prayer has a purpose in which length of time is irrelevant.

What if someone said to you: "Today I must go to the doctor. I am worried about it. I am not sure how long I should stay. And I'm not sure what to say—I'm trying to be as well prepared as I can. But I fear I will be very distracted and inattentive. So could you help me? How long should I stay in the doctor's office; what are some things I can say that would make it a useful experience; how can I avoid becoming distracted?" You would know at once that this person is confused about the basic meaning of a doctor. These questions never get asked because a visit to a doctor has a clear goal that dictates each of the answers; and once that goal is grasped, the questions disappear. Does our present-day concern with quantity in prayer reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of what prayer is about, or more aptly, what God is about in our prayer time? The emphasis on quantity of mental prayer is a relatively recent development in the history of the Church, and became common only in an age when Scripture was much less to the fore than it had always been, and than it is again becoming.

St. Ignatius Loyola was not eager to see his men get into the habit of long prayer. He said on different occasions, "... of a hundred men given to long prayer the majority of them or 'ninety of them,' or 'ninety-nine of them' ordinarily come to grave consequences." It is not a ringing endorsement of our current trend.

Someone directed by St. Francis De Sales presented for his approval a daily schedule of spiritual exercises which began with one hour of prayer. The saint crossed this out and in its place put "24 hours."

Yet St. Francis prayed at length. As did St. Ignatius. As did, at times, Jesus. Did Jesus urge long mental prayer on his followers? Though Jesus had much to say about prayer, he refers to long prayer—as best as I have been able to find—only twice, and those references are not encouraging. Do not be like the pagans who think that they will win God's favors "because their prayers are long" (Matt 6:7, Good News). And again: "You lawyers, you rob widows' inheritances and you cloak it in your long prayers" (Mark 12:40). In neither case is he pushing the practice.

From Jesus, the early Church took a string of brief prayers, such as "Help my unbelief," "Lord, that I may see," and—the most famous—"Lord, have mercy on me a sinner," from the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, an ejaculation which became over the course of time the Jesus Prayer. From Paul comes the exhortation to pray always which played a great part in the development of prayer approaches in the early Church.

If mental prayer of regular length—fifteen minutes or a half hour or an hour each day—is not so important as we tend to make it, what is the nature of the spiritual life? How can a series of brief, ejaculatory prayers open us to the gift of God's deepest intimacy? This is the crux: the deepest intimacy with God is not dependent on a regular minimum input of mental prayer. On what then does it depend? Doesn't God first desire to gift me with a regular prayer life (e.g., a daily half hour faithfully kept), because that gift must precede, or ordinarily precedes, the highest gifts of union with Him? No. He has other gifts that do precede the highest, but this focus on a daily prayer time is a false lead.

How can this be? How can ejaculations suffice? What are the elements that *do* count, elements that may not be present in long prayer? Is it possible that long prayer approaches do not stress those elements in prayer that are most crucial to growth!

Such a radically different suggestion about the prayer life as is made by St. John and St. Augustine and St. Ignatius comes from thinking about the spiritual life in a rather different way. It is a

view of spirituality where faith plays a decisive role.

I would like, then, to say something about faith in general, then about faith in the sense of God's gift of faith, before I discuss the crucial role of faith in the spiritual life, and how it lends itself to brief, frequent prayer rather than long stretches of prayer. Here are a few words on faith.

Your provincial comes to you, the province treasurer. "We've just been given over a million dollars. Where should we invest it?" Your brother works for the government agency that allocates contracts on government jobs. You call him in Washington. He tells you, "I've got all my money right now in the Brady Construction Company. It's just about to get a huge government contract; and if you look at the market, you'll see it's rising fast."

You put the money into Brady stock. Each day you notice it's on the rise.

Friday afternoon at 2:00, you get a call from your brother. "I had to go into the boss's office today to put a paper on his desk. He was away. I couldn't help but notice a letter on his desk addressed to John Brady. The contract is not approved. I right away called my broker. I don't think Brady Construction will survive this rejection. Now you've got an hour before the market closes. By Monday everyone will be pulling out."

You do just what your brother did: you sell the stock. But you did not see the letter. What you saw was each day's rise in the market report. To all appearances, all was going well. Despite what you see, you are selling the stock. That is because of what you have heard. Faith is blind, we say. But faith is not deaf. If faith were deaf, there would be no faith. No phone call means no selling of the stock. But faith is blind. It does not see the letter, the truth beneath the appearances.

Faith hears what it doesn't see. It requires, therefore, a witness, someone who does see what you don't, a witness who speaks the truth to you, a witness who reveals the illusory nature of what you see. Faith, then, is a hearing. It is a hearing

experience. You did not sell because of any reasoning of yours. No. You sold because you got a phone call, and what you heard was something not subject to reason at all.

Faith has many meanings in human conversation. But the meaning that it has in the gospel is a hearing of a witness who assures me of what I myself cannot see. What makes me prefer to believe him rather than my own eyes—that we will take up soon. For the moment we need the fact that faith always involves a witness who does see and who speaks to me in some way and whom I hear and whose words I choose to act upon.

Now let us take an example of faith in the gospel area. There are events in our world where God appears to be in control. The bad weather breaks just before the outdoor graduation. A nephew gets a good job after everyone has been praying hard. Someone bounces back from an operation. There are also events where God does not appear to be in control. A young mother dies. A brother keeps on drinking, and it keeps getting worse. Children starve to death on East Timor.

That is our world: a mixture of events. In some, God's hand appears strong; in others, absent.

How to build our faith, in such a world? If God's hand always appeared strong, the building of faith would be so easy. But given this mix of events, what path will lead to a strong faith?

We have a tendency to focus on the good things: the weather we needed, the job he got, the curing of someone. We fix our attention on the good things that happen. Gradually we can build up an image of the world where only the good things happen. We can, then, say and feel, "God always comes through."

But, of course, this isn't faith at all. It's an illusion. Most of the real world has to be ignored, left out. This fake faith requires a constant turning away from reality. Certain TV shows I turn off. "They depress me—to see all those people starving, sick." Certain parts of the city are avoided. My world narrows. This fake faith can be consoling, but it is not from the Lord. It is a natural, instinctive way of responding to the evil, the apparent absence of God from certain areas of our world.

To get at the real faith experience, I would like to use an example from Jesus' own life. I am not a Scripture scholar, so I have no reputation to lose if I am reading into the text, but the example will be most useful anyway.

Jesus encounters a crowd of people, and he is moved with pity (Matt 9:36-39). He sees them as "sheep without a shepherd," a very depressing image. But with the next verse Jesus will make a strong positive statement about the same scene. The gospel does not tell us how come he changes from negative to positive. I suggest: perhaps it was those words "without a shepherd." These are abandoned people. They are without a shepherd. In the midst of his feeling sad at their abandoned look, did Jesus hear, "Who calls these people 'shepherdless'? I am the shepherd of Israel. These people are not abandoned. They are my chosen people." Did Jesus enter into—through a faith experience, a hearing experience—a deeper sense of God's commitment to Israel? Certainly he had faith experiences, and they were central to his mission as savior. Did he here become more deeply aware of God's determination to save this people?

God affirms His involvement with this people. He is at work, hard at work, right in the midst of this scene, though it doesn't appear to be so. But He is indeed at work, secretly. It is hidden from Jesus' eyes. But it is God Himself who is at work secretly like a seed, hidden beneath the depressing appearances. And since it is God who is at work, then it is surely an effective working. Surely God will not fail. Surely that seed will grow and triumph. And there will be a day of glory.

Jesus then turns to the apostles and talks of a "great harvest." It is an image filled with hope based on what cannot be seen. It is a conviction that the reality of this scene is very different from what it appears. Jesus did not see the Father at work any more than we do. He heard the Father's word, and he believed. We, also, are invited to hear the Father's word and believe. What was visible was surface. What was basic was known only through a hearing. Jesus heard the Father, and the Father was

the witness. The Father does see His own actions in the heart of each person in the crowd, the invitations from the Spirit to love, to trust, the history of each one's life in relation to God. The Father does see His own determination to save. The Father knows the effectiveness of His own work. He speaks that in our ears. And by choosing to believe, we enter into a vision of the world as it really is, a world being invaded by the Godhead. The great harvest looms immense in the believer's consciousness.

Here is another example to illustrate the nature of the faith experience. Chris loves Marie very much, but she is not so taken with him. She does go out with him regularly, but she's not interested in getting closer. In fact, she's looking around for someone new. She never says this to Chris. Whenever he professes his love to her, she responds in the same words, but for her it's just a form. Now Chris actually knows this because one day he overheard Marie on the phone when she spoke of how limited her love for him is. He never lets her know.

But nothing better for Marie comes along, and they keep on dating. And gradually Marie changes. She falls in love with Chris. This fills her with delight. She tells him of her love, but she must use the same words she has been using all along. She notices that Chris is not all that delighted—no matter how often she tells him of her love.

Something has happened inside Marie. An event has taken place within her. She has become strongly attached to Chris. It fills her with delight. But Chris does not know about it. If he were to realize the change, he would be delighted. Marie wishes that there were a way whereby Chris could become aware of what has happened inside her, could share in her awareness. If only there was a way his consciousness and hers could inter-penetrate.

God is in that same situation with us. He is quite aware of His decision to love us. He is conscious of His affection for us. But we are not. The data we have are ambiguous. They don't decide the issue. But with God there is a way for Him to penetrate our

consciousness and to make us aware of what only He knows. We call that action of God the faith experience. Through it we share in the divine consciousness. We come to know what we could never know by our reasoning on the surface data.

Here is a description of faith taken from *Sacramentum Mundi*:

When you believe, you share in the divine consciousness.

Faith is a divinizing, supernatural participation in the very life of God. It is a personal encounter.... God offers you His friendship by disclosing the secret of His divine consciousness, and you enter God's intimacy.¹⁴

Jesus felt himself invited to affirm God's love for Israel no matter how abandoned they appeared. Under the indications of abandonment, in a secret working, God was present delivering His people. To become aware of this produces great joy in us. Such is the nature of the gift of faith.

Faith, then, operates apart from seeing the evidence. It is a form of hearing someone who sees what we do not see. The words of this witness invite us to believe. If we believe, we pass out of the illusion that the surface presents, and we enter a deeper truth.

The path to true faith is the opposite of the path to false faith. Instead of ignoring those scenes where God appears to be absent, the believer seeks them out! The worst possible situations are the best for hearing God's voice. Christians have persistently sought out the lepers, the abandoned, the starving, the wretched—those whom God seems to have turned His back on. It is among them that His voice can be heard. Where else would the loving Father be except among His most needy children!

If I work among the needy in the hope that I will soon see great changes, I will not stay long in this work. Only the consolations that the Lord alone can give can sustain the believer in the midst of apparent ineffectiveness. The believer knows that God is helping the poor, not because of this or that indication, but because he knows the Lord and His com-

mitment to the poor. We never get past faith in this life, and faith is not a seeing, but a hearing.

"Of course, God is here with all His mighty love!" We are invited to affirm that, and enabled to affirm it, by the gift of faith.

CHAPTER TEN HONESTY, THE GOAL OF OUR SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY

Let us now look at the role that the gift of faith plays in the spiritual life.

When I look at my spiritual growth, I find that there are times when growth is evident. At times, I am feeling a certain peace and schedule. There will be times when there is no sign of growth. I still cannot see why I feel this way.

How are we to acquire "faith"? It is not a matter of "faith" in our areas of weakness. We are often depressed. As we look at some of our weaknesses, we are often depressed. So we are depressed in some of our weaknesses.

Keep in our memory the fact that faith is a gift. It leads to a feeling of peace, love, and joy. I have read in some of the scriptures that faith is a gift. I have read in some of the scriptures that faith is a gift.

Imagine yourself called to the path of faith. You are called to the path of faith. There are many who are called to the path of faith. There are many who are called to the path of faith. There are many who are called to the path of faith. There are many who are called to the path of faith.

That afternoon you are in the path of faith. You are in the path of faith. You are in the path of faith. You are in the path of faith. You are in the path of faith. You are in the path of faith.

